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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000893

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SUBJECT: GOB - "AVIAN INFLUENZA NOT BEHIND 100,000 POULTRY DEATHS"

Classified By: By Charge Jonathan Moore for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) Summary: Approximately 100,000 chickens have died in two separate accidents at Belarusian poultry farms since July ¶14. The GOB stressed that human error was at fault and maintained that AI was not detected. Health officials reiterated that the deaths were unfortunate accidents, but assured Poloff that GOB's response to the possible AI threat was swift. An independent news report, however, suggests the two accidents were not a coincidence, but an orchestrated GOB effort to cover up a possible AI outbreak. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On August 6, Belarus' state controlled national TV channel BT reported that human error, not AI, was to blame for the recent chicken deaths at two Belarusian poultry farms. Until announced on TV, few knew that Belarus had lost 20,000 chickens in the Vitebsk Oblast on July 14 and 75,000 in the Gomel Oblast on August 6. On August 8, independent online news source Belorusskiy Partizan (BP) doubted the coincidence of the two tragedies, speculating that the mass deaths and official explanations were created to cover up an AI outbreak. However, BP offered little proof to substantiate this claim.

20,000 Dead In Vitebsk

¶3. (SBU) On July 14, 20,000 chickens died at the poultry farm Vitsebskahrpradukt (Drazhna, Vitebsk region). Authorities blamed the death on suffocation after a temporary electrical outage shut down the ventilation system. When Poloff contacted the administration of a nearby pig farm, the secretary confirmed that the large-scale deaths were due to

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electrical failure. However, the ventilation system has since been repaired and no more deaths reported. No health or security officials were deployed to the farm and no AI tests were conducted. (Note: BP noted that authorities used the same "electrical failure" reason to explain another mass poultry death in the Grodno region earlier this year. We have not found any information regarding poultry deaths in Grodno. End Note.)

75,000 Dead in Gomel

¶4. (SBU) On August 6, 75,330 chickens died at Gomel's largest poultry farm Asobina in the Buda-Koshelevski region. Authorities blamed the deaths on food poisoning. Aleksandr Konon, deputy head of the anti-epizootic and

disease-prevention department with the Chief Veterinary Service of the Agriculture Ministry told Poloff on August 9 that experts from various Belarusian agencies and ministries quickly responded, but found no traces of AI on the farm grounds after conducting three "complicated" toxicology tests. Some carcasses and samples of bird food were sent to Minsk for further testing.

Food Poisoning the Final Verdict

15. (C) Poloff on August 11 contacted professor of agricultural sciences at the National Academy of Sciences Ivan Nikitchenko, an independent and anti-Lukashenko member of the intelligentsia, who did not doubt the Gomel chicken deaths were a result of poisoning. Nikitchenko explained that it was not a rare occurrence, noting that he had witnessed similar livestock poisonings when he served as head of a regional agricultural executive committee in the Mogilev oblast.

16. (C) Director of Veterinary Science of the Vyshellesky Institute of Experimental Veterinary Medicine Boris Birman on August 11 also blamed the deaths on food poisoning. Birman, chief of Belarus' laboratory responsible for avian research and disease analysis, claimed a farm employee confused feed recipes and added too much of one ingredient (the name of which he did not mention) that, in large doses, is toxic to poultry. (Note: On August 15 the GOB announced that the chicken feed contained too much calcium, which in large quantities reportedly causes heart failure among birds. End note.) As for GOB response time, Birman assured Poloff that once news of a mass poultry death surfaced, Gomel regional health and security officials quickly mobilized and Minsk-based officials were on their way to Gomel within the hour. The region's population was notified and the farm

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quarantined until tests proved negative for AI.

GOB Health Official: "AI A Farce!"

17. (C) On a side note, Birman castigated the global AI "scare," claiming that in his 30 years of research, bird flu had not once put humans in danger. According to Birman, those who have allegedly died from bird flu more than likely died from another disease, but world governments and their respective pharmaceutical companies saw the economic and political profitability of associating bird flu, an easily identifiable disease, with a "deadly pandemic." Birman stressed more serious and lethal avian diseases existed, such as Newcastle disease, which posed a greater risk to humans.

Comment

18. (C) Although GOB officials claim Belarus is AI free, it is unlikely that AI-infected birds are observing Belarus' "no-fly" zone, especially during migration season. Given the large GOB interest and investment in the poultry industry (USD 560 million to increase poultry meat production by 70%) and the regime's propensity for secrecy, it is doubtful the GOB would admit an AI outbreak, let alone initiate a mass culling campaign under such pretexts. However, we have not seen any reliable evidence to counter the claims that the tragedies were a result of human error.

Moore